Gen. Catlin Tells How "Devil Dogs" Cleaned Out Belleau Wood

MARINES ENTERING the TRENCHES.
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MAJOR GENERAL GEORGE BARNETT
COMMANDER in CHIEF of the MARINE CORPS
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GAS ALARM STARTS the MARINES MOVING.

Straight to Death Marched the U. S. Marines "With Heads Up and the Light of Battle in Their Eyes," Says Their Commander

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'Roughnecks' Were Told "Give 'Em Hell, Boys," and in They Went, Slowly and Silently, as if on Parade, Wasting no Wind

This is the second instalment of Brig.-Gen. Catlin's account of the United States Marines and their achievements in stopping last spring's German drive for Paris. Gen. Catlin, then Col. Catlin, commanded the Sixth Regiment of the Marines. In the initial instalment, published last Sunday, he told how they were transported to France, trained in trench warfare under French supervision, "initiated" in a quiet sector, where they first saw their dead, and then suddenly, at the end of May, ordered overnight to the crucial point in the breaking French line and there, before dawn of June 2, posted to receive the full shock of the German horde. A third and final instalment will be published March 16.

By BRIG.-GEN. A. W. CATLIN.

CHAPTER VI. (CONTINUED).

CARRYING ON.

WE now faced the dark, sullen mystery of Belleau Wood, Berry on the west and Holcomb on the south. That the wood was strongly held we knew, and so we waited.

It was rolling country, with small woods scattered all about and farm land between. From many of the little hills a good view could be obtained of a considerable expanse of beautiful pastoral landscape.

Of these woods Belleau was the largest, being about two kilometers from north to south and something over a kilometer from east to west. A kilometer is about three-fifths of a mile. It was, therefore, not a large forest, but it loomed up before us like a heavy, menacing frown in the landscape. It was a typical piece of well kept French woodland, which the foresters had thinned and cared for so that the timber was of fairly uniform size and the underbrush fairly well cleaned out inside. At the edges there was some undergrowth and smaller trees and saplings.

The timber was not large but grew very thickly. The trees were rather tall. I should say they would not average more than five or six inches in diameter, but they were set so closely that when our men got in they found they could see not more than fifteen or twenty feet through the wood, except where axe or shell fire had made small clearings. Belleau Wood stood on high, rocky ground and hid innumerable gullies and boulder heaps.

We were nearer to the woods on the south than on the west, and on both sides open wheat fields lay between our lines and the forest. From without it appeared almost impenetrable, and there were those open spaces to cross. Behind us lay the smaller woods where our own reserves were waiting.

All through June 5 we waited with nothing of moment occurring save increasing artillery fire on both sides. The sound of it was at times deafening. To this day I do not know why the Germans did not attempt a sortie.

As a matter of history, they never did come out, for on the following day the Marines went in.

CHAPTER VII.

"GIVE 'EM HELL, BOYS!"

THE morning of June 6 found us holding the shortened line that I have just described, with Berry's battalion of the Fifth and Holcomb's of the Sixth in front and Sibley's of the Sixth in immediate support. That something was going on within those threatening woods we knew, for our intelligence men were not idle. The report on this morning was to the effect that the Germans were organizing in the woods and were consolidating their machine gun positions, so that a sortie in force seemed not unlikely.

As a matter of fact, we had been prepared for something of the sort for nearly two days. On the night of the fourth Lieut. Eddy, the intelligence officer of the Sixth, with two men stole through the German lines and penetrated the enemy country almost as far as Torcy. They lay in a clover field near the road and watched the Germans filing past them. They listened to the talk and observed what was going into the woods.

It was a risky thing to do, but they brought back valuable information. This Lieut. Eddy was a daredevil anyway, and loved nothing better than to stalk German sentries in Indian fashion and steal close to their lines. The Marine service has always attracted men of that type.

As I say, we were looking for a sortie, but none came, and in the afternoon we were ordered to attack at 5 P. M. The Germans must be driven out of Belleau Wood.

There were sound strategic reasons for this remarkable order. In the first place, pressure had to be relieved northwest of Chateau Thierry before that position could be made secure. Belleau Wood now formed a dangerous salient in our curving line, and to straighten that line from the advanced position at the northwest down to Triangle Farm it was necessary to take in the town of Bouresches and at least a part of the wood.

In the second place, Belleau Wood was too strong a natural fortress to be allowed to remain in the hands of a powerful enemy on our immediate front. It was strongly garrisoned with infantry and machine gunners, and the big guns were coming up. For the Germans it formed a base of attack that threatened our whole line to the south. So long as they held it a sudden thrust was possible at any time, and such a thrust might mean untold disaster, probably the quick advance on Paris. For us it was an effective barricade. The Allies could not advance with that thorn in their side.

The Problem at Belleau Wood.

Obviously Belleau Wood had to be taken and that right quickly, whether we were to act successfully on the defensive or on the offensive. It would have been suicidal to wait for the German attack. An assumption of the offensive was the only solution. That we were expected to succeed speaks volumes for the confidence that we had won.

Belleau Wood is longer than it is wide, and the easiest way to take it was from west to east. Otherwise we would have been plunging against the enemy's deepest strength.

Holcomb's battalion was ordered to hold the line, while Sibley's was to come up, pass through it and make the attack on the southern section of the woods, starting in on the western side. The objectives for the first attack mentioned in the orders were the eastern edge of the woods and Bouresches. Berry's battalion was to attack from the west on Sibley's left.

The second prearranged objective was another section of the woods and a line over the high ground south of Torcy. The French and the rest of the Fifth were to push on toward the north, with Torcy and the rest of the woods as the ultimate objective. As will be seen, a part of these objectives were attained promptly and decisively, while others were delayed.

The orders to attack at 5 o'clock were written at brigade headquarters, about three kilometres in the rear, at 2 P. M. At 3:45 a copy was handed to me by Lieut. Williams, Gen. Harbord's aide, who came up by motorcycle.

I was supposed to direct Berry's movements, though he had also received the orders from his own regimental headquarters. I telephoned at once to Berry's P. C. at Lucy, but his battalion was beyond reach and he was himself in the woods in their rear, a mile away. It had been impossible, on account of the heavy shelling, to run a telephone out to him. I sent runners, but I was sure they couldn't reach him before the attack would have to be made.

No one knows how many Germans were in those woods. I have seen the estimate placed at 1,000, but there were certainly more than that. It had been impossible to get patrols into the woods, but we knew they were full of machine guns and that the enemy had trench mortars there. We captured five of their minnenwerfers later. So far as we knew there might have been any number of men in there, but we had to attack just the same, and with but a handful.

Sibley and Berry had a thousand men each, but only half of these could be used for the first rush, and as Berry's position was problematical, it was Sibley's stupendous task to lead his 500 through the southern end of the wood clear to the eastern border if the attack was not to be a total failure. Even to a Marine it seemed hardly men enough.

The men knew in a general way what was expected of them and what they were up against, but I think only the officers realized the almost impossible task that lay before them. I knew, and the knowledge left me little comfort. But I had perfect confidence in the men; that never faltered. That they might break never once entered my head. They might be wiped out, I knew, but they would never break.

It was a clear, bright day. At that season of the year it did not get dark till about 8:30, so we had three hours of daylight ahead of us.

As soon as I received the orders I got Holcomb and Sibley together at the former's headquarters, some 500 yards back of the line. With map in hand I explained the situation to them without trying to gloss over any of its difficulties and gave them their orders. I found them ready. As we stood there Sibley's battalion was filing by into a ravine getting into position. The two Majors passed on the oral orders to the company commanders.

With Capt. Laspierre I went on to Lucy and from there to a point where I could observe the action. As I went through Lucy I passed around the left of Sibley's men, now waiting in the shelter trenches, ready to go over the top. The machine guns were in position, both those of the machine gun company of the Sixth and those of two companies of the machine gun battalion attached to the brigade. They were just back of the front line. Each company had eight automatic rifles and eight in reserve; all were used.

Men Cool and Ready for Battle.

The men seemed cool, in good spirits and ready for the word to start. They were talking quietly among themselves. I spoke to several as I passed. Some one has asked me what I said, what final word of inspiration I gave those men about to face sudden death. I am no speechmaker. If the truth must be told I think what I said was, "Give 'em hell, boys!" It was the sort of thing the Marine understands. And that is about what they did.

Our artillery fired for half an hour, shelling the woods, but there was no artillery preparation in the proper sense of the term. They had no definite locations and were obliged to shell at random in a sort of hit or miss fire. It must have been largely miss. The German artillery, on the other hand, increased its fire as Sibley's men went into line.

Before us stood the frowning wood, with its splintered trunks and shell shattered branches, and with the little jungles of undergrowth at the edge filled with threat and menace. It was like entering a dark room filled with assassins.

Watches had been synchronized and no further orders were given. As the hands touched the zero hour there was a single shout, and at exactly 5 o'clock the whole line leaped up simultaneously and started forward, Berry's 500 and Sibley's 500, with the others in support.

Instantly the beast in the wood bared his claws. The Boches were ready and let loose a sickening machine gun and rifle fire into the teeth of which the marines advanced. The German artillery in the woods increased the fury of its fire, and the big guns at Belleau and Torcy, a mile and a half away, pounded our advancing lines.

On Berry's front there was the open wheat field, 400 yards or more wide—winter wheat, still green but tall and headed out. Other cover there was none. On Sibley's left there was open grass land perhaps 200 yards wide; his right was close to the woods.

Owing to the poor communications the two battalions engaged in what were virtually independent actions, and, as I had feared, Berry got the worst end of it. He had to face that wide open space, swept by machine gun fire, with a flanking fire from the direction of Torcy.

My eyes were on what Sibley's men were doing, and I only knew in a general way what was happening to the battalion of the Fifth. But Floyd Gibbons, the correspondent, was with Berry and saw it all. He was, in fact, seriously wounded himself and has lost an eye as a result. Gibbons says that the platoons started in good order and advanced steadily into the field between clumps of woods. It was flat country with no protection of any sort except the bending wheat.

Into a Hell of Bullets.

The enemy opened up at once and it seemed, he says, as if the air were full of red hot nails. The losses were terrific. Men fell on every hand there in the open, leaving great gaps in the line. Berry was wounded in the arm but pressed on with the blood running down his sleeve.

Into a veritable hell of hissing bullets, into that death dealing torrent, with heads bent as though facing a March gale, the shattered lines of marines pushed on. The headed wheat bowed and waved in that metal cloudburst like meadow grass in a summer breeze. The advancing lines wavered and the voice of a sergeant was heard above the uproar:

"Come on, you —— —— ——! Do you want to live forever?"

The ripping fire grew hotter. The machine guns at the edge of the woods were now a bare hundred yards away and the enemy gunners could scarcely miss their targets. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. Our men were forced to throw themselves flat on the ground or be annihilated, and there they remained in that terrible hail till darkness made it possible for them to withdraw to their original position.

Berry's men did not win that first encounter in the attack on Belleau Wood, but it was not their fault. Never did men advance more gallantly in the face of certain death; never did men deserve greater honor for valor.

Sibley, meanwhile, was having better luck. I watched his men go in and it was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever witnessed. The battalion pivoted on its right, the left sweeping across the open ground in four waves, as steadily and correctly as though on parade. There were two companies of them, deployed in four skirmish lines, the men placed five yards apart and the waves fifteen to twenty yards behind each other.

I say they went in as if on parade, and that is literally true. There was no yell and wild rush, but a deliberate forward march, with the lines at right dress. They walked at the regulation pace, because a man is of little use in a hand-to-hand bayonet struggle after a hundred yards dash. My hands were clenched and all my muscles taut as I watched that cool, intrepid, masterful defiance of the German spite. And still there was no sign of wavering or breaking.

Oh, it took courage and steady nerves to do that in the face of the enemy's machine gun fire. Men fell there in the open, but the advance kept steadily on to the woods. It was then that discipline and training counted. Their minds were concentrated not on the enemy's fire but on the thing they had to do and the necessity for doing it right. They were listening for orders and obeying them. In this frame of mind the soldier can perhaps walk with even more coolness and determination than he can run. In any case it was an admirable exhibition of military precision and it gladdened their Colonel's heart.

The marines have a war cry that they can use to advantage when there is need of it. It is a blood curdling yell calculated to carry terror to the heart of the waiting Hun. I am told that there were wild yells in the woods that night when the marines charged the machine gun nests, but there was no yelling when they went in. Some one has reported that they advanced on those woods crying, "Remember the Lusitania!" If they did so I failed to hear it. Somehow that doesn't sound like the sort of thing the marine says under the conditions. So far as I could observe not a sound was uttered throughout the length of those four lines. The men were saving their breath for what was to follow.

I am afraid I have given but a poor picture of that splendid advance. There was nothing dashing about it like a cavalry charge, but it was one of the finest things I have ever seen men do. They were men who had never before been called upon to attack a strongly held enemy position. Before them were the dense woods effectively sheltering armed and highly trained opponents of unknown strength. Within its depths the machine guns snarled and rattled and spat forth a leaden death. It was like some mythical monster belching smoke and fire from its lair. And straight against it marched the United States Marines, with heads up and the light of battle in their eyes.

Well, they made it. They reached the woods without breaking. They had the advantage of slightly better cover than Berry's men and the defensive positions at the lower end of the woods had not been so well organized by the Germans as those on the western side. The first wave reached the lower edge with at the edge of the woods and plunged in. Then the second wave followed, and the third and the fourth, and disappeared from view.

Watching the Advance.

I had no field telephone and felt obliged to see what was going on. I took my stand on a little rise of ground protected by a low line of bushes about 300 yards from the woods. It was near a road where Holcomb's left had been in contact with Berry's right. The shelter trenches did not cross the road. From this point of vantage I watched the advance through my glasses.

Bullets rained all around me, the machine gun crews near me forming a target for the Germans. There was a great racket of rifle and machine gun fire and bursting shrapnel and high explosives, like the continuous roll of some demoniacal drum, with the bass note of the heavy guns that were shelling Lucy.

I saw a number of our brave lads fall in that advance. The German machine gunners aimed low to sweep the ground, catching most of the men in the legs. And those who fell lay right in the line of fire and many of them were killed there on the ground. Those who were able to stand and keep going had the best chance. Some of them went through the whole fight with leg wounds received during the first ten minutes.

I am able to tell something of what went on in the woods that night, but my own participation in the conflict ended abruptly right there, and before continuing the narrative I may as well give a brief account of what happened to me.

Just about the time Sibley's men struck the woods a sniper's bullet hit me in the chest. It felt exactly as though some one had struck me heavily with a sledge. It swung me clear around and toppled me over on the ground. When I tried to get up I found that my right side was paralyzed.

Beside me stood Capt. Tribot-Laspierre. He had been begging me to get back to a safer place, but I was obstinate, and he never once thought of leaving me. When I fell he came out of his cover and rushed to my side. He is a little man and I am not, but he dragged me head first back to the shelter trench some twenty or twenty-five feet away. My life has been spared and I owe much to that Frenchman.

Drilled by Bullet, He's Annoyed.

I have heard of men getting wounded who said that it felt like a red hot iron being jammed through them before the world turned black. None of these things happened to me. I suffered but little pain and I never for a moment lost consciousness. Nor did any thought of death occur to me, though I knew I had been hit in a vital spot. I was merely annoyed at my inability to move and carry on.

The bullet went clean through my right lung, in at the front and out at the back, drilling a hole straight through me. I am inclined to think that it was fired by a sniper in the trees at some distance to the left, who was trying to pot our machine gunners. I believe it was a chance shot and not the result of good marksmanship, for the bullet must have come some 600 yards.

Experts have made a study of the action of rifle bullets and have discovered that a bullet fired at short range—less than 500 or 600 yards—twists in such a manner that when it strikes an obstacle it wabbles. If my bullet had been shot from near at hand it would have torn a piece out of my back as big as my fist. On the other hand, a spent bullet is already wabbling and would have made a big hole in the front of my chest and perhaps would not have gone clear through. That is why I believe that my bullet came from a sniper about 600 yards away and I am thankful that it did.

Capt. Laspierre laid me down in the bottom of a three foot trench and there I remained for an hour and a half. He opened my coat and shirt, but there was little he could do. Most of the bleeding was internal.

In about three-quarters of an hour Dr. Farwell, the regimental surgeon, came from Lucy and administered first aid treatment. These trips all had to be made under heavy fire.

As I lay there before turning the orders of the day over to Lee I was chiefly conscious of my anxiety over the outcome of the battle. My mind was as active as ever and it was torture to lie there and not be able to see or do anything. I received reports from Sibley by runners telling of his progress and these I read to Lee when he came.

Dr. Farwell brought stretcher bearers with him, but I was kept there in the trench for a while because of the heavy artillery fire. Gas shells began to burst near us and they put my gas mask on me. I never knew before how uncomfortable one of those things could be. It is hard enough for a man to breathe with a lung full of blood without having one of those smothering masks clapped over his face.

Fortunately, my interest was so firmly fixed on the fortunes of battle that I had but little time to indulge in any feeling of discomfort. I heard the sound of the firing gradually recede and I knew that Sibley's men were advancing. Then it came nearer on the left and I knew that Berry's outfit was being beaten back. It was not an ideal way to observe an action and my anxiety would have been almost unbearable if it had not been for one or two reassuring messages from Sibley. That grand old man was as hopeful as if the whole American Army had been at his back.

After a while the artillery fire let up a little, though it was still on when they carried me back to Lucy, whence I was rushed to the forward hospital and shot full of anti-tetanus serum. Then on to Meaux and finally to Paris, where I arrived at 4 A. M. the next day—June 7—after being eight hours in the ambulance. I remained in the hospital until July 22, when I was discharged and came home on leave.

So much for my personal experience. Meanwhile the battle for Belleau Wood was going on and I received detailed reports of it.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN BELLEAU WOOD AND BOURESCHES.

MAJOR BURTON WILLIAM SIBLEY is one of the most picturesque characters in the Marine Corps. He is a short, swarthy man, wiry and of great endurance. His men loved him and would follow him everywhere. He is as active as a boy, and it was he who, on foot and fighting as desperately as any of them, personally led those two companies of Marines into the death haunted labyrinth of Belleau Wood. Stanch veteran of Marines that he is, he deserves all the praise that can be heaped upon him for that night's work.

The minute they got into the woods our boys found themselves in a perfect hornets' nest of machine gunners, grenadiers and riflemen. No one could have realized how strong the enemy's position there was, or I do not believe that we would have been ordered in without more adequate artillery preparation. There were machine gun nests everywhere—on every hillock and small plateau, in every ravine and pocket, amid heaps of rocks, behind piles of cut timber and even in the trees.

These German guns in the wood were well placed to cover all zones with both lateral and plunging fire. But the marines never faltered. They attacked those nests with rifles, automatics, grenades and bayonets. In small groups, even singly, they charged the machine gun crews and their infantry supports with wildcat ferocity, fighting like fiends till the Huns were dead or threw up their hands and bleated "Kamerad." Then they rushed on to the next one.

Amid Machine Gun Nests.

The most effective method was to run to the rear of each gun in turn and overpower the crew. But each flanking position was covered by another gun which had to be taken immediately. It was a furious dash from nest to nest, with no time to stop for breath. In the thick of the melee the wild yells of the Marines were mingled with the constant crackle of rifle fire like bunches of firecrackers exploding.

Through the smoke of battle that drifted like fog among the tree trunks, Sibley kept to his course across the southern section of the wood. There was dense brush in spots, where men got lost and found themselves isolated and cut off from their squads. The wounded dragged themselves to thickets and depressions—any place where they could hide from those prying bullets and wait till there was time for some one to carry them out. They were short of water and the suffering of many of them was intense, but they urged their comrades to leave them and press on.

An hour passed; two hours, the Marines still fighting with the savage intensity of catamounts. "All the time," said Private Frank Damron afterward, "the fighting consisted in running from one shell hole to another. Shove your bayonet at a Hun and he will give up. I myself had very little 'sticking' to do. You could generally get them with a rifle bullet first." "Our men," added Corporal John Miles, "went after them with fixed bayonets, and drove them as a fellow drives a flock of chickens."

The action was all in the hands of the platoon officers. Success or failure rested on their shoulders. It is not the General who wins such a battle as that, but the Captain, the sergeant, the private.

Fighting in Indian Style.

It had been called an exaggerated riot, that desperate conflict in the wood. It was hand to hand fighting from the first, and those Germans, hating cold steel as they do, soon learned what American muscle and determination are like. From tree to tree fought our Marines, from rock to rock, like the wild Indians of their native land. It is the sort of fighting the Marine has always gloried in. And in that fighting they beat the Germans on two points—initiative and daring, and accuracy of rifle fire. They picked the German gunners out of the trees like squirrels, and in the innumerable fierce onslaughts that took place at the machine gun nests the Marines always struck the first blow and it was usually a knockout. It was a wild, tempestuous, rough and tumble scrap, with no quarter asked or given. Rifles grew hot from constant firing and bayonets reeked with German gore. It was man to man, there in the dark recesses of the woods, with no gallery to cheer the gladiators, and it was the best man that won.

The thick woods made the fighting a matter of constant ambuscades and nerve racking surprises, but the Marines tore on. With Sibley at their head nothing could stop them. Machine gun nests whose crews held out formed little islands in the welter about which the Marine flood swept, eventually to engulf them. Some of the Germans turned and fled, abandoning their guns; others waited till caught in the rear and then threw up their hands and surrendered; some waited in huddled groups in the ravines till the gleaming eyed devil dogs should leap upon them; some stuck to their guns till an American bullet or an American bayonet laid them low. One by one the guns were silenced or were turned in the opposite direction.

Prisoners Begin Coming In.

They started in at 5 o'clock. At 6:45 the report was sent to headquarters that the machine gun fire at the lower end of the woods had been practically silenced. At 7:30 German prisoners began to come in.

Night fell with the fighting still going on and only the flash of shooting to see by. But at 9 o'clock word came from Sibley by runner that he had got through and had attained the first objective, the eastern edge of the wood. In four hours he and his men had passed clear through the lower quarter of Belleau Wood, traversing nearly a mile, and had cleaned things up as they went. And only 500 of them started; I hesitate to mention the number that finished.

At 10 o'clock reenforcements were sent in with orders to consolidate the position. Two companies of engineers were reported at Lucy and they were ordered to help. Their assistance was invaluable, for though there was still heavy fighting for the Marines that night, the engineers started in at once and by morning had the position reasonably secured. Orders to stop further advance were sent out at the same time.

During the night the fighting raged for five hours or more with gradually diminishing fury, and those men who were able to snatch a few minutes sleep in a shelter trench or rifle pit were the lucky ones.

Meanwhile an equally important and successful action against odds had been taking place at Bouresches, the town just east of the woods at its lower end. It was necessary to eject

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